

EPA Proposes to Remove Toxic Waste Near San Jacinto River

by [Jim Malewitz](#) | Sept. 28, 2016

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Michael Stravato

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits, an EPA Superfund site that is contaminated with dioxins, is located on Interstate 10 east of Houston.

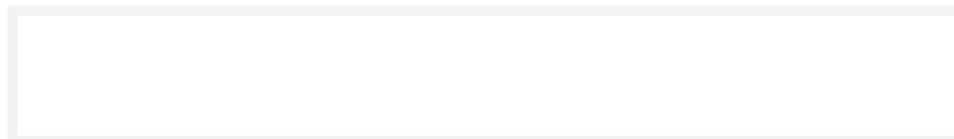
Federal regulators have a plan to remove toxic waste that has festered for more than half a century near the San Jacinto River in Harris County.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday proposed to remove 202,000 cubic yards of dioxins and other pollutants from a 14-acre site along Interstate 10 east of Houston, which has long stirred environmental and health concerns. The projected price tag is \$97 million.

Five years ago, the companies responsible for the waste installed a temporary cap that sought to contain the sludge. But that armored structure has occasionally needed repairs — including a significant fix after [divers found a 20-foot hole in it](#) last December.

“Based on the recommendation of EPA site managers and the on-going maintenance and repairs of the temporary cap, we are proposing to remove contaminated material and provide the community with the most protective cleanup plan for the San Jacinto waste pits site,” Ron Curry, an EPA regional administrator, said in a statement.

The agency will take public comments through Nov. 28 before finalizing the plan.



Local environmental groups cheered the announcement Wednesday.

"It looks really good," said Bob Stokes, president of the Galveston Bay Foundation, as he was still reading the proposal. "Now, the issue is to ensure that the engineering plans and on-the-ground actions that take this waste away are as tight as possible."

U.S. Rep. [Gene Green](#), D-Houston, who long pushed to remove the waste, called the announcement "a relief."

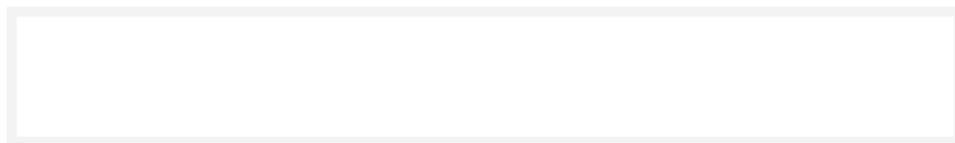
"The regulatory process works," he said in an interview. "Galveston Bay is so important for both industrial, but also recreational and fishing that we need to clean this up."

But the plan drew some criticism.

"What EPA is proposing to do is the riskiest of the two solutions," Thomas Knickerbocker, an attorney for San Jacinto Citizens Against Pollution, said Wednesday. His citizen group instead calls for the waste to stay put, and be secured by a permanent cap — so as not to disturb long-settled contaminants.

The San Jacinto River and waterways it feeds into, like Galveston Bay, are tainted with a wide variety of chemicals that likely came from many different industrial operations. In recent years regulators have traced some of the most noxious pollution to the partially submerged in question — where wastewater from a now-shuttered paper mill was dumped into Houston-area waters beginning in 1965.

Decades ago, environmental rules were more lenient and no one knew the wastewater held dioxin, now known to be highly toxic and carcinogenic.



Long-term exposure to dioxin, a component of [Agent Orange, the herbicide that devastated countryside during the Vietnam War](#), can [lead](#) to severe reproductive and developmental problems. In the short term, dioxin exposure can cause skin and liver problems, as well as nausea and vomiting.

Discovered in 2005 and added as an EPA Superfund site in 2008, the San Jacinto pits have spurred litigation and years of debate about how best to clean them up.

In 2014, lawyers for Harris County and the state [won](#) a \$29.2 million settlement from McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. and Houston-based Waste Management Inc. related to the pollution — money that's been used to improve communities near the site.

Another defendant, International Paper Co., escaped penalties in the lawsuit, but Harris County is appealing that decision.

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan called the EPA's announcement Wednesday "good news."

Removing the waste carries some risks, such as the potential to stir up some of the contaminants, which do not dissolve in water.

That's what San Jacinto Citizens Against Pollution fears, and it argues that building a permanent cap would prove cheaper than hauling away the pollution. Knickerbocker pointed to a [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study](#) that suggested that removing the waste could prove riskier than letting it sit.

But a host of local officials and environmental groups say the best option is to remove the waste but to do so carefully.

“This is not going to be 100 percent clean,” said Stokes, of the Galveston Bay Foundation. “There is some risk in taking this away, but we felt like the risk of leaving it in place is greater, certainly, in the much longer term.”

EPA proposes \$96.9 million removal of Waste Pits

Posted: Wednesday, September 28, 2016 12:00 am

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Wednesday the proposed plan to address contamination at the San Jacinto waste pits Superfund site in Harris County.

The EPA's proposal is to remove a total of about 202,000 cubic yards of contaminated material from the northern and southern impoundments at a cost of nearly \$96.9 million.

"Based on the recommendation of EPA site managers and the ongoing maintenance and repairs of the temporary cap, we are proposing to remove contaminated material and provide the community with the most protective cleanup plan for the San Jacinto waste pits site," said regional administrator Ron Curry. "We encourage everyone to review our plan and provide us comments so we can reach the best decision to protect San Jacinto-area communities and the river itself."

The plan will be open for public comment for 60 days, beginning Thursday, Sept. 29, and ending Monday, Nov. 28. EPA will also host a public meeting at the Highlands Community Center in Highlands on Oct. 20 where members of the community will be invited to offer comment.

EPA will share further details closer to the date of the public meeting. After the public comment period has ended, EPA will prepare a response to the comments, and announce the selection of the final remedy. EPA may select a different alternative or a modified version of the preferred remedy based on new information or public comments.

The proposed plan presents a summary of the risks associated with the hazardous substances at the site, including dioxins and furans; a summary of remedial alternatives; and the preferred remedy to address the contamination at the site. EPA has also released its administrative record, which consists of all the 800 to 900 documents used to support its preferred remedy.

Specifically, the preferred remedy calls for a \$87 million cleanup to remove an estimated 152,000 cubic yards of materials exceeding EPA's public health-based cleanup levels, install institutional controls, and monitor the natural recovery for the northern impoundment; and a \$9.9 million cleanup to remove an additional 50,000 cubic yards of materials for offsite disposal of waste materials from the southern impoundment.

The San Jacinto waste pits site consists of impoundments dug near the San Jacinto River in the 1960s to hold toxic waste from a paper mill. EPA added the site to the National Priorities List of Superfund sites in 2008, after testing revealed contamination from dioxins and furans near the waste pits. EPA is the lead agency for



EPA Proposes \$96.9 million Removal of Waste Pits

addressing the site and cleaning up the contamination, with support from several state partners and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Look for more coverage in Thursday's Baytown Sun.

More information about the proposed plan is available at <https://www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwp>.

Public Comments can be presented at the public meeting or submitted during the public comment period from September 29, 2016, through November 28, 2016 by online form, email or USPS.

Online: www.epa.gov/tx/forms/sjrwp-comments Email: R6_San_Jacinto_Waste_Pits_Comments@epa.gov

EPA calls for removing San Jacinto toxic waste

Staff report September 28, 2016 Updated: September 28, 2016 10:39am

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Photo: Michael Paulsen, Staff

IMAGE 1 OF 47

A sign warns the public about the EPA Superfund Site and not to eat contaminated seafood caught from the water along Interstate 10 near the San Jacinto River east of Houston in Channelview. (Chronicle file ... [more](#))

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Wednesday the preferred plan to address contamination at the San Jacinto waste pits Superfund site in Harris County is removing about 202,000 cubic yards of contaminated material at cost of nearly \$97 million.

"Based on the recommendation of EPA site managers and the ongoing maintenance and repairs of the temporary cap, we are proposing to remove contaminated material and provide the community with the most protective cleanup plan for the San Jacinto waste pits site," EPA regional administrator Ron Curry said. "We encourage everyone to review our plan and provide us comments so we can reach the best decision to protect San Jacinto-area communities and the river itself."

Specifically, the plan calls for a \$87 million cleanup to remove an estimated 152,000 cubic yards of materials exceeding EPA's public health-based cleanup levels, install institutional controls and monitor the natural recovery for the northern section of the site. And the EPA proposes to spend another \$9.9 million cleanup to remove an additional 50,000 cubic yards of materials for offsite disposal of waste materials from the southern section of the site.

The EPA plan will be open for public comment for 60 days, beginning Thursday and ending Nov. 28. EPA also will host a public meeting at the Highlands Community Center in Highlands on October 20.

EPA will share further details closer to the date of the public meeting. After the public comment period has ended, EPA will consider and prepare a response to the comments, and announce the selection of the final remedy. EPA may select a different alternative or a modified version of the preferred remedy based on new information or public comments.

The proposed plan includes a summary of the risks associated with the hazardous substances at the site, including dioxins and furans; a summary of remedial alternatives; and the preferred remedy to address the contamination at the site.

The San Jacinto waste pits site consists of an area dug near the San Jacinto River in the 1960s to hold toxic waste from a paper mill. EPA added the site to the national priorities list of Superfund sites in 2008, after testing revealed contamination from dioxins and furans near the waste pits. EPA is the lead agency for addressing the site and cleaning up the contamination, with support from several state partners and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

EPA Plans \$97M Cleanup of Houston-Area Superfund Site

By DAVID WARREN, ASSOCIATED PRESS
DALLAS — Sep 28, 2016, 4:39 PM ET

About \$97 million will be spent to remove material in waste pits along the San Jacinto River east of Houston that is contaminated with toxic chemicals from a former paper mill, the Environmental Protection Agency announced Wednesday.

The remediation of the Superfund site will include hauling away soil, sediment and other material from the disposal sites that were built in the 1960s and contain material contaminated with dioxins, which in people can cause cancer, reproductive problems, skin disease and changes in hormone levels.

The mill was in the Houston suburb of Pasadena, and pulp and paper waste was placed on barges and then dumped along the San Jacinto. The area was deemed a Superfund site in 2008, a designation used for the nation's most contaminated land. Signs in the area caution people not to eat fish or crabs caught there.

Most of the \$97 million will go to efforts to clean up 14 acres just north of Interstate 10, the EPA said in a statement. Another \$10 million will be spent on removals from about 20 acres south of the interstate. An estimated 152,000 cubic yards of material will be hauled away from the area north of the interstate, a volume that amounts to 140,000 tons.

The EPA will accept public comments on the cleanup plan for the next two months, and Rock Owens, who heads the environmental compliance division for the Harris County attorney's office, said contractors could begin removing contaminated material in the next year or two.

"It's been moving forward rather quickly, I think," Owens said of the effort since the land was given Superfund status. "Our office has been putting pressure on the EPA since Day 1 to get the stuff out of there."

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan said in a statement that the waste pits weren't discovered by government inspectors until 2005 and that they had become partially submerged in the river water.

A protective cap was put in place in 2011, but not before dioxins for years had leaked into the water and riverbank, Ryan said. Problems have been found with the cap, such as a hole found in it last year that may have allowed additional dioxins to seep away.

"We are very pleased that the EPA's preferred remedy ... will lead to the removal of the contaminated material from the San Jacinto River," Ryan said.

Two companies, International Paper and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp., a subsidiary of Waste Management, will cover the cost of the cleanup, Owens said.

Tom Ryan, a spokesman for International Paper, said IP is not responsible for the waste and that the dumping occurred before it purchased the mill.

"When you purchase a company you purchase the liability that comes with it," he said.

IP said in a formal statement that it is evaluating the plan.

McGinnes, the company that contracted with the mill's previous owner to dig the waste pits, released its own statement criticizing the EPA plan. The company argued that the better option is reinforcing the cap because excavating the site would release contaminated material along the river and put "nearby communities at risk for years to come."

But Owens has argued that in light of destructive storms that periodically strike southeast Texas, the best course of action is to haul away the soil and sediment. He added Wednesday that the EPA's solution may not be a panacea because a full assessment of the site has not been done.

"I hesitate to say they're getting all of it out because we just don't know," he said.

EPA Announces Proposed Plan For San Jacinto Waste Pits

According to a statement, EPA's preferred remedy proposes removing a total of about 202,000 cubic yards of contaminated material at a cost of nearly \$96.9 million dollars

HPM NEWS STAFF | SEPTEMBER 28, 2016, 11:27 AM (LAST UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 28, 2016, 1:40 PM)



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The Environmental Protection Agency announced its plan for the San Jacinto Waste Pits.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has announced [the proposed plan](#) to remove contamination at the [San Jacinto River Waste Pits superfund site](#) in Harris County.

According to a statement, EPA's preferred remedy proposes removing a total of about 202,000 cubic yards of contaminated material at a cost of nearly \$96.9 million dollars.

Authorities with Harris County Public Health have been urging EPA officials to remove toxic waste from the San Jacinto river arguing it's the only course of action to address threats to human health and the environment.

The plan will be open for public comment for 60 days, beginning tomorrow and ending Monday, November 28th.

Texas officials discovered the waste pits in 2005 along the river, between Channelview and the small town of Highlands.



Vince Ryan
Harris County Attorney

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 28, 2016

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Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan praises
EPA proposed plan to clean up
San Jacinto River Waste Pits

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan praised the Environmental Protection Agency for their proposed plan to clean up the dangerous San Jacinto River Waste Pits.

The EPA's plan would remove an estimated 152,000 cubic yards of material contaminated with dioxin, the most dangerous chemical known to man, at an expected cost of \$96.9 million. The plan will ensure that no chemicals are released during this removal process.

"This is good news," County Attorney Ryan said. "We are very pleased that the EPA's preferred remedy, which is based on scientific evidence assessing risk factors, will lead to the removal of the contaminated material from the San Jacinto River."

County Attorney Ryan spoke with EPA Region 6 Administrator Ron Curry to express his gratitude for the work of the EPA and others.

Highly toxic paper mill waste was deposited along the river at the Interstate-10 bridge in the 1960s and has become partially submerged in the water. The waste pits were discovered by the government in 2005. The EPA named the pits a Superfund site in 2008. Although the companies responsible for putting the waste at this site put a cap over it in 2011, dioxin has leaked out through the years; in fact, a large hole was found in the cap late last year. Signs warn people not to eat fish or crabs caught near this location.

The Harris County Attorney's Office sued the companies involved in 2011, winning a \$29.2 million settlement from Waste Management Inc. and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. That money, split between the county and the state, is being used for improvements to the

communities along the river near the waste pits site. The third defendant, International Paper Co., won the lawsuit, but the County Attorney's Office is appealing.

"I urge everyone to send a comment urging the EPA to move forward with this proposal," County Attorney Ryan said. "You can send your comment by going to the County Attorney's website at www.harriscountycao.org."